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"Intelligence is like money and love: there is never enough."

— A Senior White House Official

AN OPPORTUNITY UNFULFILLED

The Use and Perceptions of Intelligence Analysis at the White House

Robert M. Gates

OUR GOAL

"Collection, processing and analysis all are directed at one goal—producing accurate reliable intelligence. . . . Who are the customers who get this finished product? At the very top, of the list is the President. He is, of course, the Central Intelligence Agency's most important customer."

—Intelligence: The Acme of Skill
(CIA Information Pamphlet)

And what have our most important customers and their principal assistants had to say about how well we achieve that goal?

"I am not satisfied with the quality of our political intelligence."

— Jimmy Carter, 1978

"What the hell do those clowns do out there in Langley?"

— Richard Nixon, 1970

"In the 1960s and early 1970s, for eleven years in a row, the Central Intelligence Agency underestimated the number of missiles the Russians would deploy; at the same time the CIA also underestimated the totality of the Soviet program effort and its ambitious goals. . . . Thanks in part to this intelligence blunder we will find ourselves looking down the nuclear barrel in the mid-1980s."

— Richard Nixon, 1980

"CIA Director McCone . . . made recommendations for checking and improving the quality of intelligence reporting. I promptly accepted the suggestions. . . ."

— Lyndon Johnson, Memoirs

"During the rush of . . . events in the final days of 1958, the Central Intelligence Agency suggested for the first time that a Castro victory might not be in the interests of the United States."

— Dwight Eisenhower, Memoirs

"The Agency usually erred on the side of the interpretation fashionable in the Washington Establishment. . . . The analytical side of the CIA . . . generally reflected the most liberal school of thought in the government. . . . When warnings

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become too routine they lose all significance; when reports are not called specifically to the attention of the top leadership they are lost in bureaucratic background noise, particularly since for every admonitory report one can probably find also its opposite in the files."

— Henry Kissinger, Memoirs

"During the past year, I have seen no clandestine reporting from Soviet sources that significantly influenced my judgment on how to deal with the Soviet Union. . . . The Intelligence Community must find ways to sharpen and improve its analysis. . . . We see too many papers on subjects peripheral to our interests. . . . Too often the papers we see explain or review events in the past and give only a bare nod to the future."

— Zbignier Brzezinski, 1978

During the darkest days of revelations about CIA by the Rockefeller Commission and the Church and Pike Committees, professional intelligence officers clung to the notion that, whatever misdeeds might have occurred, throughout its history CIA had rendered exceptional service to American Presidents by producing the finest analysis based on the best human and technical sources in the world. We judged our contribution to White House decisionmaking on issues of moment and events great and small, and found it outstanding. This contribution made us, in our view, indispensable and cemented a special relationship between several Presidents and CIA. Have we been so long and so deeply mistaken? Has an entire Agency of people who specialize in political nuance, subtle signals and human relationships deluded itself and over a generation totally miscalculated the value of its work to six very different Presidents? The above quotations would suggest so. After all, they *did* in fact say those terrible things about us—and still are.

The way intelligence is processed at the White House and how it is received and regarded behind the scenes has never been clear to CIA, even at senior levels, except in broadest outline. It is time to lift a corner of that curtain in order that intelligence professionals might better understand what happens at the White House to the product of our collection and analysis, what the President and his Assistant for National Security Affairs expect, what they see, how it is processed, how they react—and, finally, whether they really mean what they say about us.

SETTING THE SCENE

To understand how intelligence is used and regarded at the White House first requires an understanding of the context in which it is received. The sheer volume of paperwork addressed to the President is staggering. Hundreds of federal employees in more than 200 agencies seek to draw his attention to this or that program, proposal or vital piece of information. An astonishing amount of their work survives departmental review and finds its way to the White House. There these papers join a river of correspondence to the President from countless consultants, academics, think tanks, political contacts, family and friends, political supporters, journalists, authors, foreign leaders, and concerned citizens. (Lest you think such correspondence can easily be disregarded, it is my view that most Presidents often attach as much—if not more—credibility to the views of family, (old) friends and private contacts as they do to those of executive agencies. Vice President Rockefeller once asked my office if Denmark really was planning to sell Greenland. Wondering all the while if he was in the market, we confirmed with CIA that this rumor from a private source was untrue. But Rockefeller had taken it seriously.)

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It is the responsibility of the Domestic Policy Staff, the NSC, other Executive offices, and the White House Office itself to impose order on this avalanche of pulp and to reduce it to proportions manageable by someone who works 15-16 hours a day, often seven days a week. The NSC alone processes 7,000-10,000 "action" papers a year—not including intelligence analyses or other purely "informational" papers. Dr. Brzezinski once asked me to calculate how many pages of reading he sent to the President weekly; the total averaged many hundreds of pages—and among White House offices the NSC is among the most stringent with respect to the length and number of items going to the President. These, then, are the first hurdles that an intelligence product faces: a president with a heavy schedule, inundated by paper and demands for decisions, surrounded by senior assistants who have as a main role trying to keep that President from being overwhelmed by paper; and a President with vast and varied non-intelligence sources upon which he also relies and in which he often has considerable confidence.

WHAT HE GETS

The President routinely receives only one intelligence product that is not summarized or commented upon by someone outside the Community: *The President's Daily Brief*. He is handed this by his National Security Adviser early every morning, along with a package that has varied little from President to President

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Contrary to what is commonly believed, this is the only regularly scheduled package of current intelligence the President receives during the day. However, through the course of the day, the National Security Adviser keeps the President apprised of significant developments overseas and may handcarry especially important cables directly to the President. In a crisis, the flow of information increases. More analysis and reports will be given to the President. He will receive current intelligence orally in meetings with his senior White House, State, Defense and Intelligence advisers, as well as from the media—often the first source of information. Nevertheless, on a day-to-day basis apart from the *PDB*, successive Presidents generally have seen only that current intelligence selected by the National Security Adviser, who works to make that morning package as succinct and small as he responsibly can.

It was not always this way—even in modern times. Before the Kennedy Administration, the President, his National Security Adviser and the NSC Staff relied almost entirely on CIA and State to provide incoming current intelligence as soon as it was processed by their operations centers and circulated to substantive officials who could decide what to send to the White House. This system was revolutionized, however, when President Kennedy created the White House Situation Room to which CIA, State, NSA and the Pentagon began to provide unprocessed intelligence information electronically. Thus, the NSC and President began receiving intelligence and diplomatic cables on developments abroad often as soon as, and often before, intelligence analysts. (The present system is not without flaws, however. Henry Kissinger observes in his memoirs, for expample, that, "*It is a common myth that high officials are informed immediately about significant events. . . . It happens not infrequently—much too frequently for the security adviser's emotional stability—that even the President learns of a significant occurrence from the newspapers.*" He notes that President Nixon learned of the historic 1969 meeting in Beijing between Kosygin and Chou En-Lai when he read about it in *The Washington Star*. One result of the establishment of the Situation Room was a significant diminution in the value of current intelligence publications that to this day has not been fully grasped by the

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Intelligence Community. Only analysis by experienced intelligence specialists lent (and lends) value to current intelligence provided the White House. Daily publications reporting purely factual information without trenchant analysis—apart from Situation Reports on crises—too often have been duplicative, too late and irrelevant. Thanks to the Situation Room, urgent information from abroad is often in the President's hands before reaching the DCI, other senior intelligence officials, and sometimes the media.

Naturally, the President receives information through channels other than the early morning folder and the occasional cable during the day. For example, President Carter routinely received current and longrange intelligence analysis through regular briefings by the DCI. Such frequent sessions specifically devoted to analysis were an innovation under Carter and provided an opportunity that did not exist before 1977 for interchange among the President, Vice President, Secretary of State and National Security Adviser on substantive intelligence issues. DCI Bush on occasion gave President Ford personal analytical briefings and, of course, analytical matters would often come up spontaneously during Bush's twice-weekly meetings with the President. All DCIs also have briefed the President and his senior advisers routinely in formal meetings of the National Security Council. Moreover, discussion at such meetings serves to convey information to the President from diverse sources. The President also receives abbreviated versions of intelligence assessments which are included in policy options papers.

President Carter saw fewer CIA assessments, NIEs, research papers and other longer range studies than either Presidents Ford or Nixon. This is due primarily to greater encouragement during the latter two Administrations for the NSC Staff to prepare "Information Memoranda" summarizing for the President the salient points of such longer intelligence papers and attaching the full text. The only longer intelligence reports to reach President Carter were those the DCI delivered personally or the infrequent instances when the National Security Adviser forwarded an exceptional one for the President's reading. Thus, while under Nixon and Ford virtually no major intelligence study reached the President without an NSC cover memorandum summarizing it and perhaps making independent comments or judgments, many more reports reached their desks than reached Mr. Carter. The NSC Staff was not encouraged to forward such studies, due in large measure to reluctance to burden the President with additional—and optional—reading: again, the consequence of the volume of paper coming into the White House. This was due in part to President Carter's penchant to read an entire paper—not just the summary—and the consequent effort to avoid diverting him with "interesting" versus "essential" reading.

In sum, each of the last three Presidents has received through regular channels only a tiny portion of published intelligence and only a fraction even of analysis specifically prepared for senior policymakers. This has placed a premium on the *PDB*—an opportunity neglected until recently—and on the willingness of the DCI to give important assessments (published or oral) directly to the President or call them to the direct attention of the National Security Adviser. (Even personal transmittal slips to the latter are of little value since as everyone resorts to this device and thus render it too common to be effective.) Disinterest or reluctance on the part of a DCI to take an activist role is a severe—even irreparable—handicap to ensuring that intelligence assessments are read by the President and the National Security Adviser.

WHAT PRESIDENTS THINK OF WHAT THEY GET

Perhaps in recognition of how busy Presidents are for years there has been an adage at the White House that the absence of criticism should be regarded as praise. Along these lines, Presidential comment on intelligence assessments are so rare that we

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are understandably tempted to assume satisfaction with what is being received. Regrettably, however, this is doubtful. Many of the infrequent comments we do receive are critical and, more importantly, Presidents have repeatedly (during or after their term of office) expressed general dissatisfaction with broad aspects of intelligence analysis—as for example President Carter did in his well-known note to the Secretary of State, DCI, and National Security Adviser in November 1978, and as President Nixon did both while in office and in his memoirs. Mr Nixon often criticized CIA analysis of the Soviet Union and Europe for not being sufficiently "tough-minded." Kissinger also presumably reflected both Nixon's and Ford's dissatisfaction when he would assail CIA's failure to predict various developments or events abroad, or for preparing "flabby" assessments that he regarded as written from the standpoint of a bureaucrat of the subject country rather than of the United States Government.

These and other principals—note the introductory quotes of this article—also have faulted the Agency for lack of imagination in anticipating the needs of the President and for insufficient aggressiveness in keeping itself informed on policy issues under consideration. Neither these Presidents nor their Assistants for National Security Affairs felt it their responsibility to keep senior Agency officials well informed in this regard, to provide day-to-day detailed tasking or to provide helpful feedback. The Agency had to depend for such guidance on what the DCI could pick up in high-level meetings and contacts—and the skill and interest of different DCIs has varied greatly in both.

Of the three Administrations I served at the NSC, the Carter team worked most conscientiously to inform CIA of the analytical needs of the President and constructively to advise the Agency of perceived shortcomings in its analysis, especially with respect to subject, timing and form. President Carter personally communicated his concerns and criticisms.

Pehaps the most comprehensive White House guidance (and indication of the President's views) in recent years was provided by Dr. Brzezinski in January 1978, when he sent a memorandum to the DCI that made the following points:

— Greater attention needs to be paid to clandestine collection targeted on the thinking and planning of key leaders or groups in important advanced and secondary countries, how they make policy decisions and how they will react to U.S. decisions and those of other powers.

— Political analyses should be focused more on problems of particular concern to the U.S. Government. Too many papers are on subjects peripheral to U.S. interests or offer broad overviews not directly linked to particular problems, events or developments of concern to the U.S. Government.

— There needs to be greater attention to the future. More papers are needed that briefly set forth facts and evidence and then conclude with a well-informed speculative essay on the implications for the future: "We expect and hope for thought-provoking, reasonable views of the future based on what you know about the past and present. . . . Analysts should not be timorous or bound by convention."

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The Carter White House took other steps to ensure better communication of high-level substantive concerns as well as perceptions of analytical shortcomings. The Political Intelligence Working Group, set up to organize remedial action in response to the President's November 1978 note, interpreted its charter broadly and worked to

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improve and better focus field reporting by State, CIA and Attaches; to improve cover so critical to good reporting; to resolve bureaucratic impediments to good reporting; and a number of other issues aimed at improving analysis and making it more responsive. As part of the work of this informal group, senior staff representatives of Dr. Brzezinski met periodically with representatives of the Secretary of State and the DCI to review foreign developments or issues of current concern to the President and to provide feedback on intelligence coverage. I believe all involved would agree that these efforts had a salutary effect in improving communication between intelligence and the White House and thus improving intelligence support to the President.

Presidents and their senior advisers will never be fully content with intelligence support and analysis. First, and despite occasional protestations to the contrary, Presidents expect that for what they spend on intelligence, the end-product should be able to predict all manner of coups, upheavals, riots, intentions, military moves and the like with accuracy. Intellectually, they know most such specific events are incredibly hard to predict—and that we are incredibly lucky when we do. Nevertheless, in the early morning hours when the National Security Adviser must repair to the President's study with the (usually) bad news about such events, the Chief Executive will not unnaturally wonder why his billions for intelligence do not spare him surprise.

Second, Presidents do not like internal controversy in the Executive Branch—especially if it becomes public. And, from time to time, intelligence analyses provoke dispute, often in public. DCI Helms' disagreement with Secretary of Defense Laird a decade ago before Congress on whether the SS-9 was a MRV or a MIRV is a case in point. Internal Executive Branch disputes over energy estimates, technology transfer, Soviet civil defense, and verification of aspects of SALT are others. Such controversies have become more frequent as disputes to contain within the Executive Branch become harder by virtue of greater Congressional access, journalistic aggressiveness and leaks. The White House's general unease with unclassified CIA analysis is rooted in this dislike for what is regarded as needless controversy. Our own citizens, not to mention foreign readers, cannot be expected to assume that a CIA publication does not reflect an official U.S. Government view—and this confusion is of concern to the White House and often a public relations and policy headache. Thus, to the extent intelligence analysis results (in White House eyes) in internal government controversy, problems with the Congress, or embarrassing publicity, it will draw Presidential ire or at a minimum leave the Chief Magistrate with unflattering and enduring feelings toward intelligence.

Third, Presidents do not welcome new intelligence assessments undercutting policies based on earlier assessments. As professionals, we are constantly revisiting important subjects as better and later information or improved analytical tools become available. When this results in changing the statistical basis for the U.S. position in MBFR, substantially elevating estimates of North Korean forces at a time when the President is pressing to reduce U.S. forces in South Korea, or "discovering" a Soviet brigade in Cuba, it is no revelation to observe that Presidents regard us less than fondly. Presidents do not like surprises, especially those that undermine policy. Intelligence is most often the bearer of such surprises—and pays the price such messengers have suffered since antiquity.

Finally, successive Administrations have generally regarded with skeptical the growing direct relationship between Congress and CIA above and beyond the actual oversight process. In recent years, the provision of great quantities of highly sensitive information and analysis to Members of Congress and their staffs has eroded the Executive's longstanding advantage of a near monopoly of information on foreign affairs and defense. The flow of information to the Hill has given the Congress a

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powerful tool in its quest for a greater voice in the making of foreign and defense policy vis-a-vis the Executive—and Presidents cannot be indifferent to the fact that intelligence has provided Congress with that tool and that the White House is nearly helpless to blunt it except in very rare cases.

OVERCOMING ISOLATION (OURS) AND SUSPICION (THEIRS)

Presidents expect their intelligence service to provide timely, accurate and farseeing analysis. Thus, nearly all Presidential comments on the quality of intelligence are critical—prompted by our failure to meet expectations. Indeed, all but one quote at the outset of this article was in response to a *specific* situation where intelligence was perceived to have failed to measure up. In short, Presidents often consider intelligence as much another problem bureaucracy to be dealt with and warily watched as it is a source of helpful information, insight and support.

To the extent intelligence professionals isolate themselves from White House/NSC officials and are unresponsive to White House *analytical* needs, this adversarial nature of the relationship will be emphasized and understanding of what we can and cannot do will be lacking. Thus, the Intelligence Community must take the initiative to establish and maintain close personal ties to White House and NSC officials from the President on down. It must also aggressively seek new ways to get the maximum amount of analysis before the President, even while experimenting with old mechanisms, such as the *PDB*. White House procedures and relationships are always dynamic; accordingly, we must always be searching for new and better ways to serve our principal customer.

Although the routine order of business and internal organization may vary greatly from Administration to Administration, I would suggest several general rules:

— Senior intelligence officials must establish and maintain a network of personal contacts in the NSC Staff and the immediate office of the National Security Adviser to ensure that we are well informed as to the issues of concern to the President; policy matters under consideration in which intelligence analysis can make a contribution; and the overall foreign and defense affairs agenda so that we can anticipate the President's needs.

  • For intelligence to be useful, it must be timely. Insofar as policy issues, foreign visitors and such are involved, often a day or two makes the difference between a vital or irrelevant contribution.

  • Periodic visits to NSC staffers on a quarterly, semiannual, or annual basis to seek guidance during the coming period is worse than useless; they can be misleading and eventually waste valuable analytical resources. Most NSC staffers do not think about their work in these terms. The ordinary result of such an approach is that the staffer will respond off the top of the head (or off the wall) or ask for work related to what he has just completed or knows to be in his in-box. We will do ourselves more good by establishing daily dialogue.

  • Similarly, as has been done occasionally in the past, the terms of reference of major papers should be shared with the NSC to ensure that what we have in mind best meets the policy need and to obtain suggestions of additional points to be covered to be most helpful.

— The role of the DCI is central to understanding the President's needs and conveying analysis to him. Few DCIs before Admiral Turner took a sustained interest in analysis or an active role in getting substantive matters before the

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President either orally or in writing. Few have been so brash as literally to hand the President published intelligence reports to read. Future DCIs must be persuaded that these undertakings are central to their role as the President's principal intelligence adviser. Moreover, the DCI should assume a similar role with the National Security Adviser—perhaps the best source of information on issues of topical interest to the President and the foreign affairs and defense agenda. Finally, the importance of routine, detailed feedback by the DCI from policy meetings, briefings and conversations with the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the National Security Adviser and Chairman, JCS to analytical managers, NIOs and senior analysts must be impressed upon DCIs. The dearth of feedback before 1977 was damaging to our work and contributed to a sense "downtown" that we were unhelpful and unresponsive. Contrary to the views of some intelligence professionals, we cannot properly do our work in splendid isolation.

— We must exploit every opportunity to get analysis to the President. When exceptional analysis is available, an appropriate senior intelligence official should *telephone* his personal contact(s) noted above and alert him to the paper (but judiciously to preserve credibility). Meanwhile, DCI briefings, NSC meetings, intelligence contributions or annexes to policy options papers, typescript memoranda, spot reports, and all other means need to be used to get information to the Security Adviser and to the President.

— Intelligence should be unafraid to speculate on the future. Everyone else around the President does—and most are far less experienced or capable analysts than we. A preferred approach would be to alternative futures and then above all state clearly our best estimate, however we caveat it. Waffling conclusions have too long made intelligence estimates a laughingstock among policymakers. "On the one hand . . . but on the other . . . " is no help to a policymaker and clearly undermines confidence in our analytical capacity. If we have no confidence in our judgment, why should the President?

— In all but two or three cases National Intelligence Estimates as presently prepared have been ignored by the White House in recent years. They are usually too late, too formalistic, and too equivocal to be of value to senior policymakers—much less the President or his Security Adviser. This need not be so. A return to the practice of issuing brief, short-deadline special NIEs that would focus on specific policy relevant issues would mean that intelligence would be available before decisions are made—and would better serve the President and his senior advisers. It would also ensure that the intelligence assessment is not buried in long options papers which rarely reach the President anyway.

  • Such SNIEs would have to be disseminated on a restrictive basis. On important issues, the circle of policy players is kept small; the contribution of any intelligence paper will be enhanced by its limited circulation and, more importantly, by the perception by its readers of its limited high-level readership. If the President or his closest advisers make a special request of analysis, they do not like to see a response apparently published in the hundreds of copies. We are mistaken as well when we become preoccupied with format and presentation to the detriment of analytical (vice reportorial) content—a problem in the past.

— The responsibility for making intelligence more relevant, timely and helpful is that of senior officials of the Intelligence Community alone. Analysts and

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managers at all levels must assume the burden of keeping better up to date on events and policy issues relevant to their area of professional concern. Such awareness must infuse all analysis from drafter to Director. Only when priority attention is given at all levels to the relevance and value of intelligence *to the consumer* from President to desk officer will intelligence analysis be better received and, in the end, be better.

The above "rules" apply to doing our work better. They will not resolve the several causes of Presidential displeasure—our support of Congress, changing assessments that have policy implications, surprises, and so forth. Even here there are some steps we can take. For example:

— We should take the initiative to let the Security Adviser or the NSC Staff know that we are preparing an estimate or other form of analysis that will revise earlier assessments and have an impact on the President's policies. This would include advance warning of new and important conclusions in military estimates such as in NIE 11-3/8 (the strategic forces estimate) or NIE 11-14 (the Warsaw Pact forces estimate), analyses of new weapons systems and so forth, as well as to political and economic analyses.

— Intelligence needs to develop a mechanism for better informing the White House about support provided to the Congress. The intelligence agencies are part of the Executive Branch; the DCI is appointed by and reports to the President. It is not improper or inappropriate for us to keep the President's foreign affairs staff more completely and regularly advised of papers we provide the Congress, possibly controversial testimony or briefings, etc. Again, some of this has been done—but a mere schedule of planned appearances or an occasional phone call are not enough. Keeping the Executive informed about our dealings with Congress is an important aspect of building Presidential confidence that we are not trying to undercut him or his policies by responding to legitimate Congressional requests.

— Finally, it would be helpful to continue keeping the White House informed in advance when we plan to publish an unclassified substantive intelligence and to highlight possible controversial points. This will become important as pressure for such unclassified publications increases. We should acquiesce in those rare circumstances in which the Security Adviser or the President asks us not to publish certain information for public consumption. Our charter is to serve the President and, secondarily, the Congress. Once information and analysis is provided to them, our responsibility is fulfilled. Unclassified publications are indeed a public service but also, frankly, a public relations enterprise. If such a service/enterprise complicates life for the President, we should be prepared to forgo it. Only a fraction of unclassified publications would be affected—and our willingness to withhold them would help build confidence at the White House that we seek to be supportive.

Although several of the above "rules" and suggestions may be controversial, the reader should be aware that all have been pursued by CIA at one time or another and by one official or another. I wish to emphasize that *haphazard*, occasional implementation has not ameliorated the underlying suspicion and dissatisfaction of successive Presidents and their advisers with intelligence analysis or their perception that we often peddle our product to the Congress and public in a freewheeling manner designed to benefit us, regardless of the problems caused the policymaker.

Some will argue that the steps I propose would subvert the independence of the analysis process and subordinate our judgments to policy considerations. That is not so!

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None implies any interference with the analyst or his judgments—except to make the latter relevant to the needs of the President and to improve the odds someone at the White House will value the analyst's work. Most are intended to allot the analyst his rightful voice in policy deliberations and to ensure that receptivity to his work is not diminished by irritation or pique resulting from controversy we have sparked on the Hill; the White House being caught unawares by analysis that undercuts policies based on earlier intelligence conclusions; or because the White House has been embarrassed by publication of unclassified analysis.

Above all, we in intelligence should appreciate the primacy of personal relationships in making government work. We have neglected to develop fully such relationships at the White House and NSC in recent years—although of course there have been exceptions. We must pursue such contacts—bearing in mind that we start all over every four or eight years and, indeed, every month as familiar faces at CIA and downtown are replaced by new. These personal contacts and a greater sensitivity to White House needs and perceptions (including of us) are essential to mitigating Presidential criticism and ensuring that the best possible intelligence product in fact reaches our "most important customer" in time to make a difference. *The above article is Secret.*

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